

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

RECORD OF DECISION

FINAL DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT PLAN
ABBREVIATED FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

ENTRANCE AREA AND ROAD CORRIDOR

Denali National Park and Preserve

Alaska

INTRODUCTION

The *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement* serves as a general management plan amendment for the entrance area and road corridor of Denali National Park and Preserve. This document describes the proposed plan for providing for visitor use and resource protection and related facility development in the entrance area and road corridor or “frontcountry” of Denali. The frontcountry includes all nonwilderness areas along the George Parks Highway, the entrance/headquarters area, and the park road corridor to the Kantishna airstrip.

This Record of Decision has been prepared by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS), pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Public Law 91-190, and the regulations promulgated by the Council on Environmental Quality at 40 CFR 1505.2. This Record of Decision details the background of the project, the decision made (selected alternative), other alternatives considered, the basis for the decision, the environmentally preferable alternative, measures adopted to minimize environmental harm, and public involvement in the decision-making process.

BACKGROUND

During the past 30 years, Denali National Park and Preserve has had a complex planning history. In three decades it has gone from a lightly visited, "old-line" railroad park to a premier international visitor destination. Denali's planning history includes master plans in 1965 and 1973, a general management plan in 1986, and several development concept plans or amendments to those plans during the last 15 years. Each plan included an attempt to outline an orderly vision of how the park would meet needs in a society that held rapidly changing and often contradictory expectations of what national parks should offer.

Since 1965 the park has tripled in size and seen the arrival of highway access, neighboring Native corporation landowners, selection by the state of Alaska Statehood Act entitlement lands, development of Alaska as an international visitor destination, and more than doubling of the state's population.

Over the last 10 to 15 years the type and level of visitor use and administrative functions in the park have changed. This has increased the need for certain frontcountry visitor and administrative facilities and services while decreasing the need for others. Large commercial tour groups now dominate the visitor profile. Increasing numbers of independent travelers are also visiting the park. Growth and changes in the area outside the park have increased the capability of the local community to provide services that were historically on park lands for purely practical reasons. These changes in visitor use and administrative functions have not been adequately addressed in any previous planning documents for the entrance area until now.

DECISION (SELECTED ALTERNATIVE)

The proposed action (alternative D) in the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement* is the selected alternative. This plan emphasizes visitor facilities and services in the frontcountry that will meet a wide range of visitor needs and interests. Frontcountry developments will be limited to actions in which the National Park Service has traditionally specialized, such as interpretive centers, environmental education opportunities, trails, resource protection programs, and campgrounds. Improved resource protection will be integrated with development actions throughout the frontcountry. The National Park Service will encourage the private sector to develop visitor service facilities (accommodations, food service, and other commercial services) outside the park.

Major actions included in the proposed plan are summarized below:

In the entrance area, the park hotel will be closed, and the National Park Service will encourage the private sector to develop visitor service facilities (accommodations, food service, and other commercial services) outside the park. The existing visitor access center will be remodeled and expanded to serve as an interpretive and discovery center, and a new visitor services building and parking lot will be constructed nearby. Camper convenience services will be provided in this same area, and the existing store and temporary shower building will be removed. Some buildings in the former hotel area will be adaptively used to provide an environmental education and science facility. A picnic area will be constructed near this facility and another will be developed near the visitor services center.

New permanent rest areas will be constructed at Savage and Toklat, with interpretive exhibits and short loop trails.

New trails will be constructed primarily in the Nenana River and Savage River areas. The Savage River trail system will provide a range of different length hikes for visitors ranging from tour bus passengers with limited time to visitors seeking an all-day experience. Short trails will be constructed at Primrose, near Eielson Visitor Center, and in the Wonder Lake area.

Interpretive opportunities in the park interior will be expanded by adding programs at the Savage cabin, installing exhibits at new rest areas, and developing the Quigley cabin into an interpretive contact center.

A total of 50 campsites will be added to the Riley Creek campground, including 25 tent camping sites and 25 walk-in sites. New backcountry campgrounds of up to 15 sites in the Nenana River corridor and up to 10 sites in the Kantishna area will also be developed. Up to 15 backcountry campsites will be designated in the Kantishna Hills. Private recreational vehicle access will continue to be allowed to Teklanika with a three-night minimum stay.

Road maintenance and repair will be upgraded to address safety concerns and major structural failures along the park road. Additional gravel will be purchased from private landowners or obtained from previously disturbed NPS lands in Kantishna.

The National Park Service will promulgate special regulations for management of the park road. New regulations will include the 1986 *General Management Plan* seasonal allocation limit of 10,512 vehicles; establishing formal "rules of the road;" and setting an allocation season limit for various types of traffic including tour and shuttle buses, private vehicles, and Kantishna business traffic. Professional photography private vehicle permits will be reduced by 50% and reallocated to a new "annual bus" category within the allocation season limit. This reallocation will be done as an annual operating decision to retain flexibility between bus systems.

The McKinley Park airstrip in the entrance area will be closed to provide for potential expansion of the Alaska Railroad depot and to reduce resource impacts in the entrance area. The National Park Service will work cooperatively with the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and others to develop a master plan for the Kantishna airstrip.

The National Park Service will continue to work cooperatively with the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities to determine the best location for improved access to the Nenana River and the appropriate size and type of facility to construct.

Guided hiking by the two Kantishna limited concessions permit holders will be allowed in designated areas and subject to certain restrictions along the park road in the Wonder Lake area.

The National Park Service will implement a visitor experience and resource protection program to prevent problems resulting from visitor use.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

In addition to the selected alternative (Alternative D - Emphasize Traditional National Park Service Programs), four other alternatives were considered. These four alternatives included a no-action alternative and three action alternatives. Each is summarized below:

Alternative A – No Action (Continue Current Management Direction) represents no change from current management direction. With the exception of development concepts not yet implemented, it continues the present course of action set forth in existing management plans and guidance documents including the park's 1995 *Statement for Management* and the 1986 *General Management Plan/Land Protection Plan/Wilderness Suitability Review*. Since this alternative represents the current situation in the park, existing facilities and services would remain. For example, the temporary park hotel would be rehabilitated as funds allowed, adaptive use of historic structures and overcrowding of administrative space would continue, campgrounds would not be expanded, and no new trail construction or additional trail maintenance would be accomplished.

Alternative B (Implement Previous Plans) would fully implement previous planning decisions and development concepts contained in approved plans such as the 1986 *General Management Plan* and the *Amendment to the 1983 Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment for the Park Road Corridor* and 1987 *Addendum for Riley Creek*. These documents propose additional facilities throughout the park to support NPS operations and also propose increased visitor services and facilities within the park entrance area. Examples of proposed facilities include a new hotel and camper convenience center to replace existing temporary facilities, a hostel in the entrance area, a new interpretive center with additional administrative space, a 50-site expansion to Riley Creek campground, and upgraded trail maintenance in the entrance area.

Alternative C (Reduce Facilities and Services in the Park) would reduce the level of development and visitor services inside the park and encourage the private sector to provide necessary new facilities such as overnight accommodations, campgrounds, and camper conveniences outside the park boundary. Major new park facilities such as an interpretive center and an environmental education center would be constructed outside the park as well. The park entrance area would function primarily as a staging area for a trip farther into the park rather than as a destination in itself.

Alternative E (Emphasize Visitor Services and Recreational Opportunities) would increase visitor opportunities by concentrating new development inside the park and providing a diversity of visitor facilities and services in the frontcountry to meet a wide range of visitor needs and interests. The National Park Service would take the lead role in providing new visitor services. A new hotel would replace the existing temporary building, and a hostel or similar low-cost accommodations would be constructed at a separate location. A new interpretive center, a camper conveniences center, and an environmental education facility would be constructed just north of the Riley Creek campground. Additional campsites would be developed throughout the frontcountry. New permanent rest areas would be constructed at Toklat and Savage, and trails would be upgraded and expanded at several locations. Road maintenance and repair along the park road would be upgraded to address documented structural problems as well as safety concerns and actual structural failures.

BASIS FOR DECISION

The proposed action has been selected as the final plan because it offers an appropriate balance between visitor use and resource protection and most effectively meets the planning goals as described in the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement*. It is based on the recommendations of the Denali Task Force, a committee formed at

the request of the secretary of the interior in 1994, on proposals received during public scoping, on previous plans, and on planning team work and impact analysis. It has been modified from the draft DCP/EIS based on substantive comments received from the public.

The proposed action has been modified to incorporate elements of alternative C that provide for improved resource protection, including removing the McKinley Park airstrip and using disturbed areas in Kantishna for gravel acquisition rather than establishing a new upland pit along Moose Creek. Modifications to the proposed action also call for completing studies of wildlife behavior and visitor satisfaction before changing traffic patterns on the park road.

The proposed action best meets the specific management objectives presented in the final DCP/EIS. These objectives call for the National Park Service to:

Provide a range of opportunities for park visitors consistent with park purposes.

Determine whether visitor use in the entrance area and along the park road can be increased while improving resource protection and the quality of the visitor experience.

Provide the type, number, and location of facilities and necessary infrastructure to adequately serve park visitor and administrative needs.

Identify resource protection needs in the entrance area and along the road corridor and integrate resource protection programs with all new development and operational changes.

Provide appropriate balance in level, type, and location of overnight accommodations and associated visitor services inside and outside the park.

The proposed action meets these management objectives by providing for additional visitor opportunities and some increased development while including specific measures to improve resource protection. The National Park Service will continue to provide visitor services such as interpretive centers, environmental education opportunities, trails, and campgrounds inside the park. Infrastructure improvements such as improved rest areas, updated utilities, and expanded administrative facilities will enhance the visitor experience and park operational efficiency. The National Park Service will integrate improved resource protection with new developments and operational changes throughout the frontcountry. Outside the park, accommodations, food service, and other commercial services will continue to be supplied by the private sector.

Most of the comments on the draft DCP/EIS addressed concerns regarding the overall balance between new development and resource protection in the proposed action and specific elements of the proposed action. Many of the comments supported the proposed action but recommended modifications such as implementing elements of other alternatives. Modifying the proposed action from the draft DCP/EIS to address substantive comments from the public resulted in a final plan that will most effectively meet the overall planning goal of improving the visitor experience while also enhancing resource protection in the entrance area and road corridor of Denali.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative which causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment and that best protects, preserves, and enhances historical, cultural, and natural resources. Alternative C allows for minimizing resource impacts and therefore maximizing resource protection inside the park. It calls for the lowest level of development in the entrance area and for reducing traffic along the road corridor. It would have the fewest adverse effects on the resources inside the park and therefore could be considered the environmentally preferable alternative. However, the impacts beyond park boundaries of alternative C may be greater than under the proposed action because new facilities would be established outside the park and traffic on the Parks Highway would increase accordingly.

MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

All practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm will be adopted as part of the plan. These measures are critical to the plan's successful implementation and are specified in detail on pages 99-103 of the draft *Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*, under the heading "Mitigation Measures and Development Constraints Common to All Alternatives." These actions include minimizing construction-related impacts on park resources and related values through careful design and siting of facilities; construction phasing; use of best management practices and sustainable design principles and technology; and commitments for additional natural and cultural resources monitoring, surveys, and research. To help compensate for irretrievable losses of wildlife habitat, the National Park Service will revegetate sites disturbed by visitor use or construction-related activities and will also restore to natural conditions an equivalent amount of acreage lost to development as a result of this plan (42.3 acres). Most of the acreage to be restored will occur on disturbed lands in the Kantishna area.

The National Park Service will fully comply with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies governing resource protection including the Wilderness Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Executive Orders 11988 ("Floodplain Management") and 11990 ("Protection of Wetlands"), National Historic Preservation Act, and agency specific guidelines. In instances where resource conditions may have changed over time or more detailed site design is required, the National Park Service will ensure that the necessary level of environmental compliance has been completed prior to implementing any proposed actions.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The National Park Service consulted with numerous agencies and organizations and the interested public in developing the planning alternatives described in the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement* for the entrance area and road corridor of Denali National Park and Preserve. The scoping process for this planning effort was initiated on July 20, 1995, when a "Notice of Intent" to prepare an environmental impact statement was published in the *Federal Register* (60 FR 37470). A newsletter announcing initiation of the planning process and soliciting input on issues and concerns was distributed to the public and public agencies on August 11, 1995. During the last week of August 1995, scoping meetings were held in Fairbanks, Denali Park, Cantwell, Talkeetna/Trapper Creek, Wasilla, and Anchorage, Alaska. Scoping concluded with a public meeting in Healy, Alaska, in October 1995. Written public comments were accepted through November 22, 1995. Numerous informal meetings and telephone contacts with interested parties were also conducted during this period.

On June 19, 1996, the National Park Service published a notice in the *Federal Register* (61 FR 31146), announcing the availability of the draft *Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*. Approximately 1,200 copies were distributed to the public on June 21, 1996. Written comments were accepted throughout the 60-day comment period which concluded on August 19, 1996. Public hearings were conducted in Anchorage, Talkeetna/Trapper Creek, Healy, Fairbanks, Cantwell, and Denali Park from August 5-14, 1996 to receive comments and ideas on the draft plan. Specific dates and locations for public hearings were announced in the *Federal Register* and in area newspapers. Notices were also posted at local post offices and community facilities. A summary of the draft document appeared on the Internet. During the comment period, 262 comment letters were received and 40 people testified at the public hearings. Written statements and oral testimonies were provided by various federal and state agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals. All verbal and written comments were considered in preparing the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement*. The National Park Service is continuing informal meetings and telephone contacts with interested parties.

As required under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the National Park Service has consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that actions contained in the final plan do not adversely affect federally protected species (such as endangered or threatened) or designated critical habitat. The National Park Service has also consulted with the Alaska State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Western Office of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to initiate and plan for coordination of survey, eligibility, effect, and mitigation of possible cultural resources in the proposed project areas. All implementation actions that could affect historic properties as defined in the 1965 National Historic Preservation Act will be evaluated through consultation with the SHPO. These actions include proposed changes to historic buildings or districts and ground disturbing activities.

CONCLUSION

A notice of availability for the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement* was published in the *Federal Register* (62 FR 1898) on January 14, 1997, and the 30-day no-action period ended on February 13, 1997.

The above factors and considerations justify the selection of the proposed action as presented in the *Final Development Concept Plan/Abbreviated Final Environmental Impact Statement* as the final plan. The final development concept plan for the entrance area and road corridor of Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska is hereby approved.

Recommended: _____ Date: _____

Stephen P. Martin, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve

Approved: _____ Date:

Robert D. Barbee
Regional Director, Alaska Region
National Park Service